

Chair of the Nobel Committee in The
Swedish Academy/Svenska Akademien

Prof. Anders Olsson

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Belgrade, Bern, Bozen, Arbil, Göttingen,
Sarajevo/Srebrenica, New York,
November 2019

Protest Note concerning the award of the 2019 Nobel Prize for Literature to Peter Handke

Signatories:

Society for Threatened Peoples

Wolfgang Mayr, Jan Diedrichsen,
Ulrich Delius

The Srebrenica-Potočari Genocide Memorial, Emir Suljagić

Jews Against Genocide, New York
Sharon Silber

Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Sonja Biserko

**Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina,
Academics and Intellectuals**
Emir Zlatar

**Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina
Camp Internees/Detainees**
Jasmin Mešković

Women of Srebrenica
Hajra Ćatić

**Hagada Jewish Community Association,
Sarajevo, Dr. Eli Tauber**

Croat National Council – BiH
Dr. Marinko Pejić

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Society for Threatened Peoples

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Dear Prof. Olsson,

Words have meaning. Their use has consequences. Literature is a mechanism, unique to humankind, that allows an individual, using the written word, to share the experience of life with a stranger. When literature is used to deny the experience of another, words become weapons capable of harming or extinguishing the life of a fellow human being.

Society for Threatened Peoples (STP), Women of Srebrenica, The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide, Jews Against Genocide (New York) and Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia supported by associations of journalists, writers, academics and intellectuals and groups representing the victims of war and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are angered and concerned by the decision to award the 2019 Nobel Prize for Literature to the Austrian writer Peter Handke.

During the Bosnian War (1992-1995) Handke without hesitation took the side of Serb war criminals. Ignoring the reality of a genocide in progress, he fantasised the existence of a global media conspiracy against Serbia. Unwavering in his support for Slobodan Milošević even after Milošević's death in custody at The Hague while on trial for war crimes, Handke composed a eulogy for Milošević which he read out at the Serbian politician's burial service.

It is beyond comprehension why the Nobel Prize Committee of the Swedish Academy should have chosen to honour a writer notorious for his intellectual support for genocide. When a writer defines literature as a form of mystical search for the truth while using his linguistic ingenuity to dispute the reality of mass murder, he betrays the most basic principles that Alfred Nobel wished to celebrate through his Prize. Handke's work does not deserve to be admired and honoured in this way.

Handke's career has spanned a period of history characterised by a never-ending succession of mass atrocities. Since the start of the Balkan Wars in 1991 the world has time and again



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seen the unthinkable repeated, in wars of aggression, the siege and bombardment of towns and cities, mass expulsions, concentration and internment camps and mass slaughter. Handke's work, and in particular his reflections on the genocide in Srebrenica/Bosnia, have nothing meaningful to say about such a world. His wilful simplifications offer a series of brief subjective insights, glimpsed through a distortion of reality, political naivety and solipsistic meandering.

In 1996 STP accused the writer of ignoring the concrete evidence of genocide in Bosnia - 100,000 deaths, an estimated 30,000 women raped, over 100 concentration and internment camps and some 750 mass graves so far discovered. Under the title "The Writer's Fear of Reality" (Tilman Zülch (ed.) (1996), *Die Angst des Dichters vor der Wirklichkeit. 16 Antworten auf Peter Handkes Winterreise nach Serbien*, Göttingen: Steidl Verlag) our organisation published a volume of 16 responses by writers, journalists and human rights activists challenging the simplistic views expressed in Handke's pamphlet "A Winter Journey to the Danube, Sava, Morava, and Drina Rivers: Justice for Serbia".

STP invited the author to meet and talk to Bosnian survivors of genocide and visit the scenes of mass slaughter, but he declined the offer. Subsequently he walked out of a panel discussion with STP's then General Secretary Tilman Zülch after only a few minutes when Zülch mentioned the existence of Serb concentration camps in Bosnia, informing Zülch with all the verbal finesse of a literary master that "this discussion is over, you arsehole."

Although he claims that his work avoids political relevance, Handke remained a steadfast supporter and defender of Slobodan Milosevic even after charges of war crimes and genocide were brought against the Serbian politician. The decision to award him this year's Nobel Prize for Literature has most merely reopened old wounds for the surviving victims of Milosevic's political ambitions, it has also provoked widespread dismay over the encouragement it offers to propagandists and opponents of the voice of truth worldwide.

The Committee's bold decision to award the 2017 Prize to Bob Dylan recognised the role of literature in shaping the real world. The 2019 award to Handke suggests an eagerness by the Academy to retreat into an environment of fantasies and intuitions. A world of genocidal warfare and conspiracy theories cries out for literature that embodies respect for human values and human dignity.



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We ask the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize Committee for a public acknowledgment of this Protest Note and we urge them to ask Peter Handke in his Acceptance Speech to apologise to the victims of genocide in Srebrenica and Bosnia and Herzegovina for having used his literary skills to deny their experience. If Handke is unwilling to do so, the Committee should insist that he relinquish the Prize. That would be the honourable and appropriate course of action for you to take.

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